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Renforcement des capacités de production agricole des communautés rurales indiennes dans la micro région du Sud Ahuachapán (République du Salvador) pour améliorer la sécurité alimentaire et augmenter les revenus pour la population locale

Aumento de las capacidades de producción agrícola de las comunidades rurales indígenas en la microrregión del sur de Ahuachapán (El Salvador), para mejorar la seguridad alimentaria y aumentar los ingresos para la población local

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Boosting the agricultural production capabilities of Indian rural communities in the micro region of South Ahuachapán (El Salvador), in order to improve food safety and raise income for the local population.

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Abstract. As is the case with many Latin American countries, El Salvador, which is regularly affected by hurricanes and is in transition towards democracy following a period of violent civil war, suffers from major inequality in the distribution of its national wealth, with almost half the population living below the poverty line. It was in light of this that, in 2002, the *Secours populaire français* intervened in the North-West of the country in the coffee growing area of the southern part of the Ahuachapán department, an area classified as a priority development area by governmental authorities. This was in the form of a project undertaken in partnership with the NGO *FUNDESYRAM* (*Fundación para el desarrollo socioeconómico y la restauración ambiental*—the Foundation for Social-Economic Development and Environmental Rehabilitation), and was co-funded by the European Union and developed over a period of nine years. Its aim was to improve food security and family economics of those in conditions of extreme poverty and it was undertaken using the principles of inter-family solidarity and respect for the environment. The involvement of the partner and the beneficiaries led to a strengthening of communal associations (the *ADESCO* (*Asociación de desarrollo comunal*—Community Improvement Associations) as well as to the creation of a production association (*'AGROCESA'* *Asociación de productores agropecuarios centro sur Ahuachapán*—Association of Agriculture and Livestock Production) in order to improve the organization, management and support of social and economic development projects. It was this that guaranteed the success of the program and enabled both the capacity building for self-management and the autonomous and unified development of those communities that benefited from the project. This project, that, among other things, contributed to the eradication of infantile malnutrition by ensuring food safety within the family and empowered women in the community, far exceeded its original objectives.

Keywords. Economic development, nutrition, poverty, environment, NGOs, agriculture.

1 Introduction

The *Secours populaire français* ('SPF'), a French NGO, has been active in El Salvador since the beginning of the eighties. During this decade, this small country in Central America suffered a very bloody civil war, which left approximately 70,000 dead and 7,000 missing and forced 500,000 people to leave the country, representing an economic and human toll of catastrophic proportions for a country of less than six million inhabitants¹.

Like many other Latin American countries, El Salvador suffers from considerable inequality in the distribution of its national wealth. Despite the fact that with an annual income per capita of \$4,000, it is classified as a middle-income country, approximately half of all Salvadorans live on less than \$2 per day², which puts them officially below the poverty line.

The SPF's involvement with South Ahuachapán began in 2002. Governmental authorities designated this department, which is a mountainous area located near to the border with Guatemala, as a priority development area. The local economy is mainly dependent on the cultivation of coffee. Following the decline in coffee prices from 2001

¹ Sources: United Nations and Salvadoran government

² Sources: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and World Bank. The average daily income in El Salvador is \$9.20.

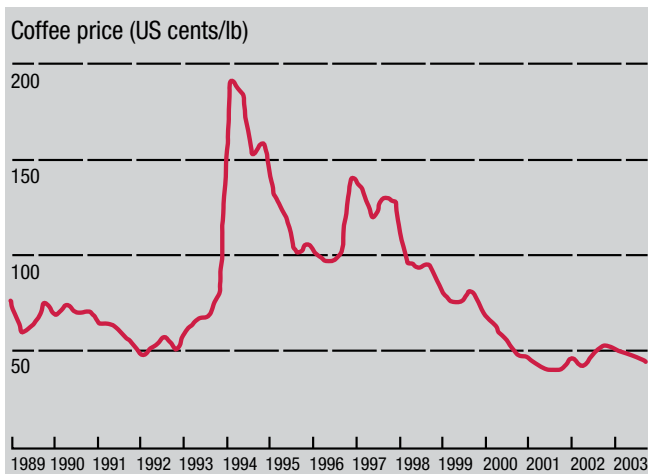


Figure 1. Fluctuations of the coffee price. Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations.

to 2003, thousands of casual day workers were left without any income just at a time when the country suffered from two natural disasters, namely Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and a devastating earthquake in 2001.

This relief work, similar to that undertaken by the *SPF* in France and abroad, is based on solidarity. They reject any form of aid that does not allow the beneficiaries to be independent. Outside of France, these activities are always undertaken in partnership with local NGOs or local institutions because of their inside knowledge of the situation and of the social and economic environment.

In the Ahuachapán province, a partnership agreement was signed in 2002 with *FUNDESYRAM* (*Fundación para el desarrollo socioeconómico y la restauración ambiental*—Foundation for Social-Economic Development and Environmental Rehabilitation), an environmentally friendly Salvadoran NGO involved in the development of sustainable agriculture and small-scale livestock farming.

Thus, following the work undertaken in 2002 with the *FUNDESYRAM*, a three-year development project (from 2004–2007) was designed to meet food safety requirements and reduce poverty for 760 families living in extreme poverty. Under the Call for Proposals scheme, the European Union co-funded three-quarters of the total budget available for this project, which amounted to \$200,000 per year. It was then continued through 2007 and 2008 thanks to joint funding (totaling \$285,000) by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the *Secours populaire français*.

The local population heralded this intervention as a great success, and it was therefore decided that the partnership with *FUNDESYRAM* should continue in order to launch a new project that would draw on previously gained experience. The European Union continued to provide funding, up to 75% of the \$1,187,620 budget. The aim of this project, which was implemented between 2008 and 2011, was to strengthen the capacity for self-management in the 17 local communities that were already the beneficiaries of previous programs. Its realization also led to infrastructural development projects such as roads, tracks, small bridges, sports facilities, schools and abattoirs, to name but a few,

for a total cost of \$1,577,450 which was financed by the local municipalities and the Government of El Salvador.

Almost 10 years after the work undertaken with the *FUNDESYRAM*, the objective, which was to reduce extreme poverty and to ensure food security in rural communities, is now achieved. The communities benefiting from the program truly made it their own, working together with the *FUNDESYRAM* teams and the *Secours populaire français*; and as a result, the program was a success. In addition to food security and increased incomes for families, the program had a positive effect on women's autonomy, respect for the environment and the learning of sustainable agriculture techniques, education for children and an increase in self-esteem and confidence for the communities.

2 Project specification (2008–2011)

The project was carried out between 2008 and 2011 and was intended to build on the results already achieved while continuing the development activities already in place. The capacity building for self-management was given priority in order that the beneficiary communities could develop together and autonomously.

Consideration was given not only to support for the non-profit sector, but also to the issues of:

- Food safety (horticulture and small-scale livestock farming) by diversifying the crops, supporting irrigation systems to allow farming even during dry periods, by increasing the quantity produced through technical training delivered by the *FUNDESYRAM* teams, and by providing training on nutritional health to families;
- Improvement in family economics by selling a proportion of what is produced;
- Protection of the environment by using organic methods and soil and water conservation techniques;
- Empowerment of women and gender equality.

The project was aimed at the 17 rural communities located in five municipalities (Jujutla, Guaymango, Apaneca, San Pedro Puxtla and Concepcion de Ataco) on the southern edge of the Western volcanic system. In total, 440 families, scattered across 19 cantons and 61 hamlets, have benefited from the project. These families include 886 adults and 1,674 children, and 93% of them are of Mayan Indian origin. All of them live in conditions of poverty or extreme poverty.

These 17 communities formed 24 '*ADESCOs*' (*Asociación de productores agropecuarios centro sur Ahuachapán*—Community Improvement Associations). More than 60 families who started marketing what they produced, formed an '*AGROCESA*' (*Asociación de productores agropecuarios centro sur Ahuachapán*—Association of Agriculture and Livestock Production).

If the measures that were taken as a direct result of this integrated development project are taken into account, then the total number of people who have benefited, either directly or indirectly, is 29,300, or 30% of the population of the Southern part of the Ahuachapán region.

3 Methodology

The program relies on the participation of beneficiary communities grouped together into *ADESCOs* at each stage: diagnosis, implementation and evaluation of the results.

Family records, updated on a regular basis, include information such as income, family situation, nutritional status of children aged from 0 to 5, access to land, type of existing production, and are precious tools used for initial analysis and then the subsequent follow-up of the results during the project, before the evaluation at the end of the program.

The program is coordinated by the local *FUNDESYRAM* teams, but the communities themselves draw up the analyses and guidelines, through the *ADESCOs*. The members of the communities are trained by the *FUNDESYRAM* teams in analytical techniques and characteristics, the members of the communities meet in a workshop to update, discuss and analyze the social, economic and environmental elements. The information collected during these work groups is structured then systematized. Each problem is assigned a main cause, to which a practical solution is suggested. The solution is sometimes possible internally, but sometimes requires support from local institutions or relevant authorities. Annual operational plans specifying the objectives and the expected results are then adopted.

Local and national institutions are systematically informed of the annual operational plans and their implementation. Communities now approach them by themselves, or submit projects in order to improve their daily life: for example, for the construction of a slaughterhouse or a bridge which might be necessary for the development of their activities.

4 Activities and results (2008-2011)

4.1 Supporting community-based associations (*ADESCOs*)

The *ADESCOs*, whose managers are elected by the community, act in a leadership capacity, and are in charge of resource management, education and training as well as supporting projects for developing the land use of the region. This type of non-profit-making structure is common throughout El Salvador and is proving to be very valuable in supporting economic and social development projects.

The program has created or strengthened 24 *ADESCOs* that, from the start, made a diagnosis of the socio-economic situation and the environment. More than 400 people, of whom 47% were women, took part in the workshops conducted by the technicians.

This work provided insight into the circumstances of the 440 families involved in the project. It helped to develop 24 five-year strategic plans (one by *ADESCO*) complemented by yearly business plans that set out the development objectives.

The involvement of both the *SPF* and the *FUNDESYRAM* was primarily at a methodological level. They conducted the meetings but left the participants to express their own needs and propose their own solutions. In addition to the organizational aspects, it was the training of the trainers that was a

priority. Thus, training was given to 75 trainers (44% of whom were women) for the agricultural and livestock farming techniques and 36 trainers (75% women) for health and nutrition. The beneficiaries appointed these trainers during the general assemblies and each trainer was responsible for the same group of families for the duration of the three-year project. There were monthly progress meetings organized with each of the auxiliaries to monitor the progress of the project and to make any corrections that were needed.

4.2 Supporting production marketing (*AGROCESA*)

The '*AGROCESA*' is, in practice, a cooperative that comprised 62 members (48% women) at the end of the project in March 2011.

The technical support that was provided entailed assistance to the members in developing their yearly business plans for their production and marketing activities, and the strengthening of the '*associative*' (non-profit-making) spirit. Various partnerships with other similar non-profit-making organizations as well as with the municipalities were initiated. Management training sessions were organized and staff members were trained on the accounting package that the association had procured.

An initial assessment of the production facilities and their demand responsiveness was undertaken. This was followed by the registering of a trademark as well as a logo, which provided added value to the produce and enabled access to more specialized markets. The products on sale were fruit, vegetables and small-scale livestock (poultry, goats and sheep) either for breeding purposes or for their meat and milk. By the end of the third year, sales had reached \$89,135.

Thanks to the support of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Farming in El Salvador and the EU, a small abattoir was built, thus ensuring acceptable conditions for the slaughter of livestock (beef, sheep and goats) and hygienic methods of packaging the meat. This abattoir meets international standards of hygiene and is therefore able to supply the export market.

Finally, there has been development in the accessibility of microcredit. The portfolio of outstanding loan claims increased by \$9,639, resulting in 31 additional personal loans. The management of this activity has been improved. Indeed the *AGROCESA* association includes a loan committee made up of 9 members elected every two years by the general assembly of the association. The loan application is submitted individually by the peasant family to the *ADESCO* which gives a recommendation and the application is then transmitted to the *AGROCESA* loan committee, which decides to grant the loan on the basis of eligibility criteria defined by the association. The amount of the loan granted cannot be lower than 50 US dollars nor higher than 500 US dollars. The rate is 13% for one year, which includes the application fee and processing costs. To this day, there have been no cases of non-refunded loans. When a family encounters any financial difficulty to reimburse a loan, they are heard by the loan committee and, together, they find a mutually acceptable solution, to avoid penalizing the family and to ensure sustainable financial funds for other microcredits.

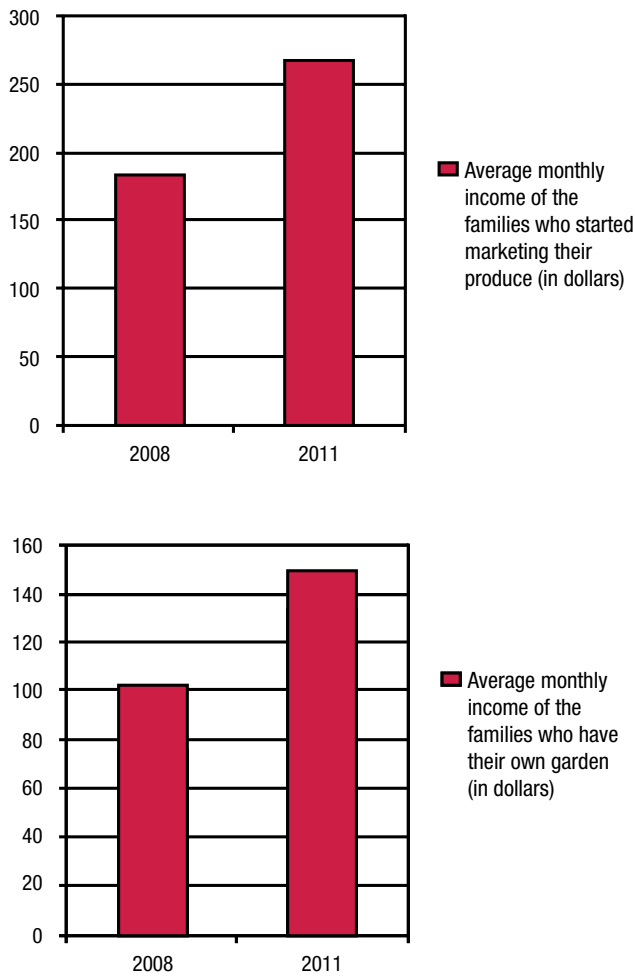


Figure 2. Average monthly income of the beneficiary families.

4.3 Development of horticulture and livestock farming

The technical personnel and the 75 trainers played a pivotal role in the training of each of the 440 families with regards to the agricultural techniques involved in livestock farming, in the manufacture of fertilizers and natural pesticides, in fish farming and soil conservation.

Each auxiliary implemented an action plan so that each family could produce enough to guarantee its food self-sufficiency and to generate income by marketing the surplus. For those families who had no land, 161 gardens were created, which was the equivalent of 5.91 hectares and which enabled them to grow 22 different varieties of vegetables for their own consumption. For those families who had a small amount of land (whether rented or owned), 50 plots, measuring 6.55 hectares in total, were provided for the production of vegetables destined for commercial markets. For those who had access to water, 35 drip-irrigation watering systems were provided.

With regards to the production of farmyard animals, 253 beneficiary families had, at their disposal, modules on the rearing of laying hens, goats (for meat and milk) and rabbits as well as on tanks for fish farming (rearing of tilapia). The project provided not only building materials, breeding animals, a

consignment of feedstuff to kick-start the breeding process, but also training and technical assistance. Each holding received monthly visits and meetings were set up for farmers to share their experiences. In addition, five specific types of training were offered for fish farming and the breeding of rabbits, hens, goats and sheep. Local breeds were crossed with more productive breeds imported from Mexico and Nicaragua. The results were very encouraging and this prompted many farmers to get into the business of breeding animals.

All these activities had the hallmark of solidarity. In addition to the shared experience among the farmers, the beneficiary families who were the most advanced participants in the program were obligated to pay back 20% of the funds they had received from them to start up their business to the *AGROCESA* or the *ADESCOs* as soon as the sale of their surplus was sufficient to do so. These funds provided the means for the associations to have access to microcredit. Similarly, the beneficiary families had to provide the same quantity of animals they had received to new families wishing to join the program so that these families may, in turn, improve their living conditions and so on.

Soil protection and an environmentally friendly type of agriculture were always a consideration. With this objective, 63 types of training were organized and 930 people participated (52% women). In addition to the training on the production of natural fertilizers, pesticides and insecticides, six environmental protection campaigns were waged against contamination of water sources. Every one of the 440 families who benefited from the project used inputs that were natural and compatible with organic farming. Among these families, a hundred of them also applied the soil and water conservation techniques.

Transforming produce in order to enhance the added value was taken into consideration. The *AGROCESA* played a key role with the support of experts from the Ministry of Agriculture of El Salvador. A dozen training sessions were organized to teach the beneficiary families all about the manufacture of cheese and jam as well as the packaging of fruit and vegetables.

As the main objective of the development of horticultural and small-scale livestock production was always the food safety of the poor, the nutritional status of the under-fives was monitored. A medically-trained nutritionist worked with the 36 health promoters who visited the 440 families every two months in order to observe the growth of the young children who were weighed and measured each time. Families were given nutritional advice as well as recipes for the crops that they harvest. They also received training on food hygiene, the nutritional quality of the food, the role that a balanced diet plays, breastfeeding, the importance of cleanliness in the home as well as children's rights. During the project's three-year duration, there were no longer any cases of malnutrition among the young children of the 440 families and child malnutrition fell from 50% to 26%.

With regards to the economic situation, between the years 2008 and 2011 the average monthly income of those families who had their own garden increased from \$76 to \$134, and for those families who started marketing their produce the income rose from \$183 to \$268.

4.4 Creation and strengthening of family-based micro-enterprises

The project supported 42 micro-enterprises by offering the participants technical training and helping them to find outlets for their production. Among these enterprises, 22 are involved in breeding and 20 in horticulture. Six specialized training sessions were organized to teach the techniques of livestock farming and fish farming.

As regards the marketing of produce, the *AGROCESA* intervened in order to provide training on outlet research and accounting management of production.

Over the three years the total turnover increased to \$89,135. The main bulk of the produce went to local markets (87% of sales), with only 13% being sold outside the region.

5 Conclusion

In addition to the drastically improved living conditions of hundreds of beneficiary families, these integrated and sustainable development activities have restored the dignity and self-respect of those very poor population groups, who are also often cast aside due to their Indian origin.

The strengthening of community organization ensures the longevity of the program and better recognition of the communities in the eyes of local authorities. The training and organization of *AGROCESA* help to secure market outlets for production surplus and contribute to boosting the families' income. In addition, the program has had a positive impact on the status of women, environmental protection, children's education and so much more.

The results of this project are very encouraging. The European Union, which commissioned an external review, rates it among the most successful projects that it has financed in El Salvador over the past three years. It has requested that the *SPF* use this project as a model by combining this experience with the experience acquired through other similar projects implemented by the *SPF* in other countries, in particular in Mali and Madagascar. The aim is to be able to replicate the experience in El Salvador in other countries.

With this notion in mind, the *SPF* is contemplating launching a new project in Estanzuelas (a municipality in the Usulután department of El Salvador). This project would be in partnership with the *FUNDESYRAM*, *Medicos pour el Derecho a la Salud* ('*MDS*') (Doctors for the Right to Health) and the municipality of Comasagua, and its objective would be to reduce poverty in this community. It would achieve this by developing the capacity for self-management of communities by fostering a sustainable socio-economic development of the region and by supporting the protection of the environment. This project would be complemented by implementing a children's health program for the under-fives, by developing horticultural and small-scale livestock farming, as well as by ensuring access to water.

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